

## Opportunities to use hands and fingers to draw and make marks are important early literacy learning experiences

*What does research tell us about the emergence and development of infant finger drawing?*

Wet sand at ocean's edge, moisture on a steamy bathroom window, bright mounds of finger paint on a sheet of glazed paper, or a bit of nontoxic lotion on a highchair tray—these are just a few of the “media” young children can use with hands and fingers for some of their earliest drawing and mark-making experiences.

Researchers at the Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) analyzed the findings from 21 studies about the emergence and development of infant finger drawing. Their focus was on identifying the person and environmental characteristics that encourage and contribute to infants learning to use their fingers to draw. Because infant finger drawing is considered one type of experience for young children to learn conventional writing skills, the researchers wanted to identify the conditions that enable children to use their hands and forefingers to draw, mark, and scribble.

The findings showed that finger drawing was facilitated when children were prompted to take part in the activity and were given feedback for doing so. Having an adult, such as a child's mother, model finger-drawing activities and a child getting to take part in multiple finger-drawing experiences over time also made them more powerful learning opportunities for the study participants. Being able to see the consequences of their finger-drawing behaviors—such as seeing the marks they made by moving their fingers in different ways on a



touch-responsive computer screen—was very reinforcing for the children. The more chances the children had to engage in finger-drawing experiences over time, the more their finger-drawing skills advanced and improved.

This *CELLnotes* summarizes findings reported in Dunst, C. J., & Gorman, E. (2009). Research informing the development of infant finger drawing. *CELLreviews* 2(1), 1-6.

# Acting on the Evidence

Download free, two-page *CELL* practices guides in versions for parents or practitioners at [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org)

Staff of CELL have created a number of practice guides especially for parents and early childhood practitioners to encourage putting this research evidence to use in home, community, and classroom settings. All of the two-page practice guides listed below are available for free download on the CELL project web site: [www.earlyliteracylearning.org](http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org). At this web address you can also find interactive posters called *CELLpops* and multimedia practice guides such as videos that illustrate practices supported by this research.

**Take a look at more infant finger drawing**

**Play Dough "Drawings"**

Gloria is 1 year old. Her mother has found a fun way to let her daughter use her fingers to make her marks. She fills the baby's wicker tray with play dough. Gloria picks and kneads, enjoying the kneading process and marks she sees. Mom makes two or three different colors of play dough to keep it fresh. She shows Gloria how to roll her fingers into the play dough. It did not take long for Gloria to learn to roll the dough. She shows how to roll the dough and look at her finger doing this for a few times. She gets a lot of play dough and kneads it between her fingers. Gloria is seeing the play dough come out of her hands.



**Especially for parents of infants!**

**Infant Finger Drawing**

*Scribbling and drawing*

Before a child can mark with a crayon or pencil, he can use his fingers to draw and "write." This manual is filled with ideas for helping your baby learn pre-writing skills.

**What is the practice?**

A lot of fun activities can help infants learn to use their fingers to draw, paint, scribble, etc. These activities will help your child use his fingers to make interesting marks and scribbles.

**What does the practice look like?**

The type of writing happens any time your child uses his fingers to scribble or mark. Babies running their fingers through pudding or kneading whipped cream between their fingers are examples of pre-writing activities.



**How do you do the practice?**

Finger painting isn't the only way to finger draw. All sorts of unusual "media" are perfect for finger drawing. Among them are dry rice, water, whipped cream, pudding, sand, play dough, and flour or cornmeal. Besides for infant-safe, homemade "finger paints" can be found on the Web by searching **homemade finger paints**.

- Figure out which finger-drawing materials will be most interesting to your child. "Messy" infants might love playing with pudding or whipped topping. "Dry" infants are more likely to play happily with play dough or water. The most fun and enjoyable the activity is to your child, the more he will benefit from the activity.

Find a place to do finger-drawing activities with your baby. "Finger painting" with whipped topping, pudding, or other foods can be done on a clean tabletop top. "Finger painting" with play dough, tub before your child's bath. "Painting" the sidewalk, deck, or other outdoor surface with water dripping from your child's fingers is fun and easy. And there's no need to clean up afterward! A box with low sides can be a makeshift sandbox. Try filling it with flour or cornmeal instead of sand.

Show your child how to use his fingers to "draw" by kneading different types of media and materials. Let your own enjoyment show if you show you like the activity, chances are he will like it too!

Show your child how to use his fingers to "write" by showing him the effort and success. A little praise will go a long way in keeping your child playing. Try not to overdo it!

**How do you know the practice worked?**

- Does your child seem pleased about or intent on trying to mark?
- Has your child shown interest in trying to do different things with his hands and fingers?

**CELL** PRACTICES GUIDE

**Take a look at more infant finger drawing**

**Play Dough Drawings**

Gloria's teacher, Bernita, has found a fun way to help her use her fingers to make her marks. She fills Gloria's wicker tray with play dough, which 12-month-old Gloria picks and kneads, enjoying the kneading process. Bernita takes two or three different play dough colors and makes them to keep it fresh. She shows Gloria how to roll her fingers into the play dough. She shows how to roll the dough and look at her finger doing this for a few times. She gets a handful of play dough and kneads it between her fingers. Gloria is seeing the play dough come out of her hands.



**Especially for practitioners working with infants!**

**Let Little Fingers Do the Drawing**

*Pre-emergent writing*

Before using crayons one child will hold a crayon or pencil and mark or scribble. They often use their fingers to draw and "write." This practice guide includes ideas for helping infants develop the building blocks for beginning writing.

**What is the practice?**

This practice guide includes activities that help infants learn to use their fingers to "draw," "write," and "scribble." The activities will help children make the connection between using their fingers and making some kind of mark or scribble. It includes some ways for parents to encourage their children to experiment.



**What does the practice look like?**

Beginning writing happens any time a child uses his fingers to scribble or mark. Babies running their fingers through pudding or kneading whipped cream between their fingers is an example of pre-writing activities.

**How do you do the practice?**

There are many different opportunities for finger drawing. These include non-toxic finger paints, play dough, and other media. There are recipes for different kinds of finger paints and play dough that are safe for infants. They can be found on the Web by searching "finger paints" and "play dough."

- Start by identifying which materials might be most interesting to your children. "Messy" infants might enjoy playing with something gooey like a fruit or contact water mixture. "Neat" infants are more engaged in the activity if the child, the more he or she will benefit from the activity.

Find an appropriate place to do the activities. "Finger painting" with a sensory food might be completed by the child in the bathtub before the child's bath. "Finger painting" the sidewalk, deck, or other outdoor surface with water dripping from the child's fingers is fun and easy and does not involve clean up.

Encourage children to use their fingers to "draw" by showing them how to use different types of media and materials. Show your excitement! If you find the activity enjoyable, chances are the children will like it too.

Show a child how to use his fingers to "write" by showing him the effort and success. A little bit of acknowledgment will go a long way in sustaining the child's play. Try not to overdo it!

**How do you know the practice worked?**

- Is the child using his fingers more often to "draw" or "write" things?
- Does the child seem pleased about or intent on trying to mark something?
- Has the child shown interest in trying to make marks or do different things with his hands and fingers?

**CELL** PRACTICES GUIDE

## Especially for PARENTS

- Infants:**  
*Infant Finger Drawing*  
*Scribble, Scribble*
- Toddlers:**  
*All... Write*  
*Art of Writing*
- Preschoolers:**  
*Delighting in Writing*  
*Write Right*

## Especially for PRACTITIONERS

- Infants:**  
*Let Little Fingers Do the Drawing*  
*Infant Scribbling Activities*
- Toddlers:**  
*Writing Through Art*  
*Writing the World*
- Preschoolers:**  
*You've Got Mail*  
*Starting Write*